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SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY'S FORUM FOR THE FUTURE PREPARATORY MEETING

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SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Over 150 participants from the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region attended the Civil Society (CS) preparatory meeting to the Forum for the Future (FFF) led by the Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH) and the Italian NGO No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ) in Casablanca, Morocco on October 31 and November 1, 2009. Three workshop reports on the global financial crisis, democracy and local governance, and human security concept greatly contributed to the 2009 FFF. However, these reports did not address CS concerns, like the legal environment of NGOs, freedom of expression and corruption. Despite a protest and uncertainty over commitment, the audience underlined the crucial role of the USG to revitalize democratization and protect reformers in BMENA and reaffirmed that the Forum was the centerpiece of BMENA reform initiatives. Despite long-standing disagreement with US policies in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, CS leaders from the region acknowledge, more than ever before, the role of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in empowering reformers and advancing democratization.

CONFERENCE TOPICS AND DISCUSSION

¶2. (SBU) The civil society preparatory meeting was the culmination of three thematic workshops held respectively in Beirut, Rabat and Doha in September-October 2009 that addressed issues on the global financial crisis, democracy and local governance, and human development and human security. Participants acknowledged that work done in 2009 was thoughtful and insightful but remains insufficient in addressing reform priorities important to civil society. Participants expressed concern about numerous obstacles and setbacks against reform and enforcement of legislation against CS. "The NGO legal environment is considered as a key topic that sets the frame for democratization in the region," said Mr. Slah Jouchi, coordinator of Network of Democrats in the Arab World.

¶3. (SBU) Participants pointed out positive impacts from the FFF's first five years, but noted it had difficulty achieving broad political reform. "Most Arab regimes have not taken actions that are consistent with their declarations to engage in democratic reform," said Mr. Ezzedine Al-Asbahi Director of the Yemeni Human Rights Information and Training Center.

¶4. (U) Many participants repeated recommendations from previous FFFs on the legal environment for CS, political pluralism, elections, rule of law, independent media, corruption and transparency, political empowerment for women and youth. There continues to be high expectation for the USG's leadership role in support of the FFF

process. The audience agreed that President Obama's Cairo speech increased positive interpretations of the USG's desire to promote democratic reform. However, action and results gave not matched the good intentions.

CS MEPI GRANTS CONTRIBUTION

15. (U) Two MEPI alumni gave presentations in the second session. Permanent Peace Movement (Lebanon) presented the first one about a field-study on benchmarking democratic reform progress in the BMENA region conducted in 10 Arab countries. Discussion on this study and the accomplishments and efficiency of the FFF process coalesced around recognizing the FFF's positive impact in fostering democratic reform, in varying degrees, across the region. One speaker noted that the process has contributed to promoting dialogue between civil society and governments, while another said that the FFF has created a new regional dynamic which positively influences the local political environment.

16. (SBU) The second presentation by Mr. Amine Ghali, Program Director of Kawakibi Center, publicized the impact of their advocacy campaign on promoting an enabling legal environment for civil society in the region through the implementation of the Partnership Document Note: The "Partnership between G8 and BMENA Governments and Civil Society" document as presented at the 2008 Forum in Abu Dhabi and outlines a set of universal standards and democratic principles to structure the relationship between governments and civil society. End Note). Coalitions led by Kawakibi Center and its national partners are using the momentum created around this campaign to encourage governments to reform the NGO laws along the principles in the Partnership Document. The two CS MEPI grants provided valuable contributions to significant and relevant discussion on the FFF's core issues.

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USG ENGAGEMENT TO ENHANCE FFF's MOMENTUM

17. (U) While most participants agreed that many NGOs in BMENA welcome the Forum's distinctive relationship with CS, some also feared that the USG is no longer giving high-level attention to democratization in BMENA. (Comment: These reactions may have changed after Secretary Clinton's Marrakech speech. End Comment.) The audience thanked donors and particularly MEPI, but underscored the need for additional financial resources to enhance the momentum gained on the reform agenda through the FFF. Skeptics questioned whether the G8 countries still see real value in continuing the FFF process and if the USG and others were willing to work with CS to implement previous recommendations. Some were dismayed at the lack of governments and CS follow-up to the four previous Forums.

ANTI-FFF DEMONSTRATION

18. (SBU) The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), which is critical of U.S. foreign policies in the region, led an anti-U.S. gathering on November 2, 2009 from 5 pm to 6 pm in front of the Congress Palace of Marrakech calling for a boycott of the sixth FFF and the CS preparatory meeting. (Comment: Anti-American groups commonly harass events with high-level USG presence as experienced in previous FFFs. End Comment.) They rejected the FFF as Western dominance and condemned the foreign model of democracy citing failings in Iraq and Afghanistan. They deem USG efforts to promote democracy as hypocritical, referring to perceived American indifference to Palestinians and support for Israel. Most Arab CSOs attending the FFF believe that those dogmatically anti-American groups will not be helpful to reform.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

¶9. (SBU) OMDH's failure to organize and run the conference in a professional manner had a negative impact on the general ambiance and the outcome of the civil society preparatory meeting. Late invitations prevented many civil society participants from attending since they were unable to obtain visas or make travel arrangements on short notice.. The majority of participants expressed their frustration over poor management of the conference, lack of working documents, erratic agenda, non-existent logistics, and absence of a final statement at the meeting end. Some activists voiced doubts about the usefulness of the CS preparatory meetings if hosted and managed by incompetent partners.

CS RECOMMENDATIONS

¶10. (U) CSOs felt that BMENA governments do not take the FFF process or CS partnership seriously. The FFF has become a show for the G8. Participants made an urgent call for partner governments to deeply believe in and commit to the spirit of partnership. Previous CS recommendations need to be turned into practical project plans, time-bound and tailored according to specific country needs. Civil society criticized its failure to come up with practical mechanisms to interact regularly with their own governments on a national level. One eminent CS participant said that the failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict prevented the United States from gaining credibility as an advocate of democracy in the Middle East. Participants see the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict as having a negative impact on the credibility of USG. Most participants argue that there is an urgent need to address the organization of the CSpreparatory meeting. They urged the USG and G8 countries to consider establishing a permanent secretariat to provide information for CS.

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